Tony Joel, The Dresden Fireboming: Memory and the Politics of Commemorating Destruction, I.B. Tauris: London, 2014; xiii + 275 pp.; 978-178076-358-3, £68.00 (hbk)

Anne Fuchs, After the Dresden Bombing: Pathways of Memory, 1945 to the Present, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2012; xii + 372 pp.; 978-0230-23851-0, £64.00 (hbk)

Why, of all the cities bombed in the Second World War, is Dresden the one that seems to stand out? Was this possibly 'The worst pre-atomic war bombing ever', as the cover of a popular 1983 paperback has suggested? For many, the answer lies in the sheer scale of destruction wrought on the Saxon capital by American and British bombers during the air raid of 13 and 14 February 1945. Inflated figures about the death toll – ranging between 100,000 and 300,000 dead – circulated widely in the post-war era, despite the fact that the authorities' body count amounted to 25,000 fatalities. In an effort to conclude a long-standing debate, the city of Dresden established an historical commission in 2004, tasked with finding out the actual number of dead. After nearly six years of research, the commission confirmed, in essence, what had been the official figure all along: a maximum of 25,000 dead. If one wants to understand why Dresden matters, one has to look beyond the figures. Dresden's rise to special status among the war-torn cities was not pre-determined by the absolute scale of destruction but was a product of the politics of memory: this is the subject of the two new books about the aftermath of the Dresden bombing. Both works explore the post-war repercussions, cultural and political, of an event that has gained iconicity.

Of the two books under review here, Anne Fuchs's *After the Dresden Bombing: Pathways of Memory, 1945 to the Present* is the more ambitious and wide-ranging. Her aim is to dissect what she terms 'the Dresden impact narrative' by exploring four different forms of media – pictures, architecture, literature, and film – that have transmitted this narraive. Fuchs approaches the Dresden bombing as a 'case study' (p. xiii) that allows her to make a theoretical point about the workings of collective memory, that is 'the role of genre-specific templates and the intermedial exchange' (p. 5). Although she does not use the label, her work performs what Stefan Haas has called the 'media turn' in historical studies. To be sure, Fuchs is a professor of German, but her monograph demonstrates how disciplinary boundaries have become fluid within the booming field of memory studies.

The book opens with a powerful discussion of the representation of Dresden in photography and fine art in the immediate post-war years. Fuchs zooms in on the work of the photographer Richard Peter on the one hand and the graphic artist Wilhelm Rudolph on the other. Between them, Peter and Rudolph produced some of the most recognisable visual images of the devastated city. Both documented the impact of the bombs through a series of images of total ruination. Through their respective media, Peter and Rudolph captured

landscapes of destruction devoid of human life. There are no direct references to human suffering, nor to human agency in the catastrophe. The overall impression is, Fuchs stresses, one of apocalyptic excess that transforms history in a 'supra-human force'.

A compulsive stock taker of the destructiveness of the bombing – and, by extension, of human history – Rudolf produced some 200 drawing of which he selected 150 for his cycle *Das zerstörte Dresden* (The Destroyed Dresden). Fuchs's analysis of Rudolph's cycle is one of the gems of this book. She demonstrates the importance of studying the cycle in its entirety rather than the individual images. While some of Rudolph's drawings of landmark buildings, such as the destroyed Frauenkirche, have become iconic, the overwhelming majority of pictures in the cycle show ordinary street views. This serialisation creates an overpowering sense of destructiveness. Fuchs notes that the first exhibition took place in Dresden in 1950, but that the cycle was later shown in other cities, too, such as Kassel, itself heavily bombed in the war. Yet, one wonders how stable the image was and to what extent it was shaped by the respective exhibition context. Did Rudolph's images convey the same allegorical sense of destructiveness everywhere they were displayed, or did different exhibition venues impose different meanings on the pictures?

Fuchs argues that visual images more than any other medium have shaped the post-war generation's understanding of the Second World War and that iconic photographs 'exceed the power of language' (p. 16). This echoes a point that historians have made, too: namely, that the Second World War (in contrast to the Great War and its 'war poetry') was a visual war above all else. Yet, this seems a strange admission from a scholar of literature, given that the Dresden bombing has produced an especially dense literary legacy. From Gerhard Hauptmann to Durs Grünbein, that air raid has become a staple of post-war literature and poetry. Moreover, the air raid on Dresden is an episode that features prominently in the literature of other countries, even countries not involved in the bombing. Fuchs revisits the work of Kurt Vonnegut and touches on Michael Morpurgo, but seems to have no space for either Harry Mulisch or Henri Coulonges. Is it really possible to establish a clear hierarchy of memory media? Does it make sense to assert the primacy of the visual? Fuchs's study shows in fact a tendency of different media to overlap and reinforce each other. The topographies of memory in Brigitte Reimann's *Franziska Linkerhand* (1974) and the invocations of photographs of 'The old Dresden' in Uwe Tellkamp's *The Tower* (2008) suggest a blurring between architecture, photography and literature, offering interplay between morphological and imaginary landscapes.

The thematic structure works well for Fuchs's monograph, although from the historian's point of view it has the disadvantage that it does not convey a clear sense of how Dresden's commemorative culture has changed over time. Readers interested in the evolution of commemorative practices should consult Tony Joel's *The Dresden Firebombing: Memory and the Politics of Commemorating Destruction*. This book is a study of the anniversaries,

their underlying politics and media representation, especially since the 1980s. The book opens with chapter on the history of the bombing, followed by another on the commemoration between 1946 and the early 1980s, but for Joel the story really begins in 1985, and the bulk of the book explores commemorations between the mid-1980s and 2005. Joel, an historian, aims to show how the city evolved into 'the paradigmatic German *Opferstadt*' (p. 39), a collective victim of the Second World War, during this period. 13 February 1985 occupies a central space here as the last 'milestone' day of remembrance before the reunification of Germany. This day saw a mass rally, the reopening of the rebuilt opera house, and various commemorative activities around the ruins of the Frauenkirche. The rally was significant because it acknowledged Dresden's symbolism as 'victim city' from a European or even universal position, while a wreath laid on behalf of the federal president at the ruins indicated an emerging 'hybridisation of German-German memory' (p. 138) even before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Victimhood, cosmopolitanisation, and hybridisation are central themes of the book which shows that developments commonly seen as post-reunification date to some extent back to the late days of the GDR.

Joel highlights the duality of the image of Dresden in the aftermath of German reunification. On the one hand, Dresden became a (perhaps even *the*) national symbol of German suffering in the war, and on the other hand, a site of reconciliation between former enemies. Much room is given to the international, notably the British dimension. The controversy surrounding the statue to Bomber Harris in 1992, the Queen's state visits to Germany in 1992 and 2004, the work of the Dresden Trust to support the rebuilding of the Frauenkirche provide a rich context to explore the transnational dimension of post-unification identity politics. Reconciliation remained a key theme in 2005, but the 60th anniversary also revealed the nastier side of the German victimhood discourse. Dresden became a 'memory battleground' in which crude calculations such as 'Auschwitz minus Dresden equals zero' (p. 249) achieved notoriety.

Joel relies almost exclusively on newspapers; the rich archives, into which Fuchs has dipped, have not been used. It does not become clear whether this is a pragmatic or conceptual choice, or a combination of both. The archives are vast and, after all, Joel's aim is to show how the bombing of Dresden has been mass mediated. While his analysis of the official commemorations and their press coverage is highly sensitive to nuances and developments, the aims and composition of the group(s) he calls 'socially-based agents' remain vague. The heterogeneity of these social agents – ranging from committed Christians to *Ausreisewillige* – and the internal conflicts within the Protestant church in the 1980s are only alluded to. Neither do we learn much about the Stasi's interventions behind the scene. Thus the focus of this book on the anniversaries and the city centre as the commemorative 'battleground' is, to some extent, a reflection of the type of sources used.

Fuchs and Joel's books complement each other nicely. The former concentrates on the culture of memory and representations, the latter on the politics of remembrance and signifying practices. Fuchs adopts a thematic approach, whereas Joel charts the chronology of the anniversaries. Both scholars suggest that the Dresden bombing has become a symbol, not just on a local and national but also on a global level; a symbol shaped by commemorative media, ranging from visual images and literary works to political rituals and newspaper coverage.

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